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## **Ethnic Identity and News Media Preferences in Malaysia**

By:

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(Paper presented at the ***Media: Policies, Cultures and futures In the Asia Pacific Region Conference*** held on 27-29 November 2006 in Perth, Australia)

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**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the news media preferences of university students from the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia – Malays, Chinese and Indians. Survey respondents are asked, in open-ended questions, to name their favorite newspaper, and their favorite television channel and radio station for keeping up with the news. Preliminary analyses indicate that ethnicity is associated with news media preferences, with each race preferring certain newspapers, television channels and radio stations. These findings can easily be explained by the language and agenda of the different newspapers and different television news programs. Malaysian media makes it a practice to target audiences and create niches according to racial lines and language. Thus, while there is no mystery regarding the news preferences of Malay, Chinese, and Indian respondents, such preferences raise certain questions about the role of journalism in the creation and maintenance of a national polity. Of great interest is the incongruity of government policies relating to media and identity. If findings of this survey are any indication of the general Malaysian population, it would mean that the media's government-sanctioned practice of ethnic-narrowcasting is successful. And yet, much debate goes on about ethnic polarization among Malaysians and the urgent need to foster a true national Malaysian identity by promoting the idea of the 'Malaysian race' (as opposed to the more established Malay, Chinese, and Indian racial identities).

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiethnic nation made up of several different races, the major ones being Malays and other smaller indigenous groups (a little over half the total population), Chinese (almost one third the total population), and Indians (slightly less than one tenth of the total population). While racial stability remains a hallmark of Malaysia's success as a nation, the seemingly growing polarization among the three major races is a growing concern. Malaysians' nationally acknowledged preferences for socializing only within their respective races, and the resultant lack of inter-racial interaction is seen as a problem and a challenge to national integration. One of the proposed solutions to the 'problem' of racial polarization is the promotion of the idea of a single Malaysian race, or *Bangsa Malaysia*.

Efforts at promoting national integration and inter-racial interaction can sometimes be seen in the media in the form of news coverage of speeches made by political leaders or other opinion leaders, and interviews or panel discussions involving opinion leaders (either reported about or aired over television). Festivities such as Independence Day, and religious or cultural holidays (namely Aidulfitri, Chinese New Year, Deepavali and Christmas) are often accompanied by touching commercials that stress national integration and solidarity. Most of these award-winning commercials are usually commissioned by large government linked corporations (GLC's). Apart of from the above, however, national integration is virtually ignored in Malaysian media, including the news media.

### **Malaysian newspapers and television stations**

Mainstream newspapers in Malaysia come in a variety of vernacular languages, namely Malay (the national language), English, Chinese, and Tamil. In addition to newspapers, Malaysians wishing to keep up with the news have several television channels to choose from. Government run *Radio Televisyen Malaysia* (RTM) hosts two channels, TV1 and TV2, while Malaysia's giant media group Media Prima Berhad own all four of the country's free-to-air television channels (namely TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9). Two pay-television operators – the ASTRO and newcomer MiTV offer broadcast mainly foreign television channels.

TV1 broadcasts news only Malay, while TV2 airs English, Chinese and Tamil news programs. TV3 airs news programs in Malay and English. NTV7 broadcasts news in Malay, English, and Chinese. 8TV airs English and Chinese programs.

(At the time this study's survey was conducted in February 2005, Malaysian television broadcasters were still operating separately and had yet to be consolidated under Media Prima. Viewers then had the option of choosing six free-to-air television channels aired by five different stations – RTM's TV1 and TV2, and four separately owned channels, namely TV3, NTV7, 8TV and Channel 9. Channel 9 has since ceased operations. The new TV9 is operated by TV3, which is also now running 8TV.)

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

In view of the availability of news in various vernacular languages (as well as Malay and English), and the different races that most newspapers and some television news programs target, what news media do Malaysians of different races prefer?

### **Media markets and race**

Malaysian media providers make it a practice to target audiences and create niches according to racial lines and language. Of great interest is the incongruity of government policies relating to media and identity. If Malaysian media's practice of ethnically targeted narrowcasting, and of importing foreign media content are well received by Malaysians (which it is very likely), it would mean that the media's government-sanctioned practices of ethnic-narrowcasting and importing media content are successful. And yet, much debate goes on about ethnic polarization among Malaysians and the urgent need to foster a true national Malaysian identity by promoting the idea of the 'Malaysian race' (as opposed to the more established Malay, Chinese, and Indian racial identities). What then, are the relationships between media offerings and national integration?

Thus, ethnically targeted news media, as is the norm in Malaysia, may not just be a reflection of ethnic polarity, but may even be a contributing factor to it. And despite Malaysian developmental theory-based understanding of journalism contributing to nation building, the diversity of media offerings in Malaysia may actually a negative factor in national integration.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Appiah (2004) points out that past research have found "ethnic identification (is a) contributing cultural variable in media use," (p.314). Further, he also found past study support of source similarity and states that individuals are influenced by media content that portray characters with whom they identify with or find similarities with. Identification theory which maintains that individuals who find particular shared traits with media characters (such as ethnicity or certain values) tend to identify with those characters and to infer that they also share other traits. Appiah (2004) further contends that ethnic minorities are much more aware of their ethnicities than are ethnic majorities, and are thus more responsive to media content that target or portray their specific group, as explained by distinctiveness theory (McGuire 1984).

Appiah (2004) suggests that media content with direct association to a particular ethnic group, for example race-based politics in Malaysia, may be salient even among people with weak ethnic identification with their ethnic groups. He suggest that media practitioners' decision to use ethnic portrayals in targeting specific ethnic groups should be based on whether the intended ethnic audience is made of people who strongly identify with their ethnic groups, or not.

In their study of inter-ethnic interaction in a multicultural university in the United States, Halualani et al. (2004) discovered a contradictory attitude towards cultural diversity and inter ethnic interaction. Despite respondents placing apparent importance on diversity of their university campus' cultural make up, very little inter ethnic interaction is recorded, and ethnical groupings almost akin polarization is the norm, as it is in Malaysia. Halualani et al. (2004) suggest two possible explanations to this anomaly which may perhaps shed light on the ethnic polarization of Malaysia's multicultural population. First, they suggest that the "invocation of diversity as important has become a socially approved stance and ideological common sense embraced by multicultural institutions that use the trope of multiculturalism in name only to highlight their commitment to intercultural diversity, yet do not actively pursue ways in which to incorporate these principles into actual practice," (p. 283). Second, they raise the questions of what economic and political factors create and sustain ethnic fragmentation within the community. The former seems to be true in Malaysia, where the multiethnic nature of Malaysia's demographical make up is often touted, even in the face of strong ethnic polarization, while Malaysia's formation history and the inherited policies of ethnic based politics answers the latter question (Zakaria & Suzaina 2005). Local media content reinforce the contradictory attitude and behavior of Malaysians with regards to multiculturalism and inter ethnic interaction. Multicultural diversity rhetoric is abundant in media promotion of Malaysia as a tourist destination and in media celebration, coverage and promotion of festivities. Yet, across all media, public and private, narrowcasting of content based on ethnic groups is the norm, from ethnic-based newspapers to ethnic targeted television programming belts.

Anastasio et al. (2005) lends some support to the assertion that there is a relationship between media content and group identification. In a reverse to the common belief that media merely report public opinion that is naturally divided by ethnicity, gender or political affiliation, Anastasio et al. showed that media depiction of public opinion that is depicted to be divided by social groups may actually create differences of opinions among social groups. It is possible that media depictions of public issues may have been a contributory factor to intolerance of other groups. For example; a 1990 survey on inter ethnic tolerance in the volatile former Yugoslavia where control of media lay with groups sympathetic to nationalists (ethnic based) sentiments found that keeping up with the news had a negative effect on inter ethnic tolerance (Hodson et al. 1994).

Sidanius et al. (1997) find three general perspectives in discussing the interface between ethnic and national identity, namely (1) the melting pot perspective, (2) the multicultural or ethnic pluralism perspective, and (3) the 'group dominance' perspective. In the melting pot perspective, national identity or attachment to the nation overrides ethnic attachments, and all ethnic groups are relatively homogenous in their attachment to the nation, as opposed to attachment to the ethnic group. In the multicultural perspective "rather than dissolving into a

unitary ethnicity of nationhood, ethnic subgroups continue to maintain their distinctiveness, (where) all of these ethnic subgroups are considered coequal partners in society ... and individuals can simultaneously maintain a positive commitment to both an ethnic particularism and to the larger political community. These dual commitments should be seen as complementary loyalties, where commitment to one identity in fact helps cement and reinforce commitment to the other identity. The 'group dominant' approach on the other hand, describes a multi ethnic nation that comes into being as a result of one ethnic group conquering another. Thus a sense of belonging to the nation is found among the dominant ethnic group, but not among the subordinate group.

According to Appiah (2004) ethnic identity is defined as " a person's knowledge of his or her membership in a social group and the value and emotional significance attached to that membership". People with weak identification with their ethnic groups are expected to display "attitudes and behaviors that are less consistent with traditional cultural values (but) closer to those of the dominant culture." (Appiah 2004: 314)

Donthu & Cherian (1992) also argue that people with stronger ethnic identities are much more loyal to their ethnic groups and traditional values, and are also more likely to behave in ways consistent with these values.

Gandy (2001) maintains that racial identity is multidimensional and situational and thus defining and operationalizing racial identity tends to be group specific and contingent upon situation. In his survey of media use and the social construction of risk among African Americans, his measure of African American ethnic identity was related to the extent that respondents linked their own fates with that of the African American ethnic group as a whole. Those agreed that "what happens to Black people generally will affect what happens in my life" and those who agreed that they "can make real progress only when the Black community as a whole makes progress" where considered as identifying strongly with their ethnic group.

Richardson (2005) posits that media framing has significant effects on audiences' identification with particular social groups. Any one individual belongs to numerous social groups all based on different things (i.e. ethnicity, socioeconomic status, favored brands or sports teams, etc) and media content and bring to surface the social group most salient to that particular content. Thus, Richardson (2005) suggests that "(media) frames can be designed to activate or deactivate a variety of ... social identities..." (p.506). It would augur very well for national integration if local media practitioners prudently used framing techniques to produce content that emphasizes national unity or national integration over neutral frames, or frames that depict an 'us' versus 'them' portrayal of ethnic groups.

Literature on *recategorization* - inducing people to identify with a larger social group so that former 'others' will be viewed as 'us' suggest that "positive affect toward others is a consequence, rather than a cause, of identification with the larger in-group" (Richardson 2005: 506). The promotion of a Malaysian national identity dubbed *Bangsa Malaysia* is practical case of recategorization.

The issue of affirmative action, designed to bring Malaysian's indigenous peoples to economic par with other races, namely Chinese, is often framed in the media and by political players in a way that depicts an 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomy, where affirmative action is hailed as a remedy to ethnic imbalance. Richardson (2005), on the other hand, suggests a reframing of affirmative action that emphasizes its' contribution to all groups – as in promoting diversity in all sectors so that all groups can learn from one another and benefit from inter ethnic interaction. The recategorization of groups whose woes are redressed into groups given a chance to contribute to the greater group (nation) facilitates national integration. Richardson's experimental study on the influence of editorial framing on Whites' and African Americans' attitudes towards affirmative action for African Americans found that media framing had the abovementioned effect.

American researchers found that minority groups with high socioeconomic status had much weaker identification with their ethnic group (see Appiah 2004). This may also be true in Malaysia. For example, proficiency and frequency of using English is commonly associated with Malaysians of higher socioeconomic status, regardless of race. In so far as language is considered an indicator of ethnic and cultural identification (although Malay is the official language, it is rare to find Chinese individuals who use it to speak to other Chinese in an interpersonal setting, also, mostly only Chinese speak Chinese and only Indians speak Indian languages), the preference for English among higher educated or richer Malaysians may signal a weaker identification with their respective ethnic groups as compared to their less wealthy or educated counterparts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Survey instrument**

A survey questionnaire was distributed to 506 students of an established public university in Malaysia in February 2005. Respondents were asked, in open ended questions, to name the television channel they most often turn to for news and the newspaper they most often read. (Because a large number of respondents wrote RTM without specifying either TV1 or TV2, all TV1 and TV2 entries were recoded as RTM.)

Data collected was analyzed to test the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Respondents of different races watch the news on different television channels.

- Hypothesis 2: Respondents of different races read different newspapers

### **Sampling**

The sampling frame of this study is the population of students enrolled in the mandatory TITAS<sup>1</sup> course during the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of its 2004/2005 Session. The TITAS course is divided into 30 classes of varying sizes. Each registered student attends a fixed TITAS class every week. Students are not allowed to swap classes as attendance is recorded for the fixed class and not for other classes.

The course registry lists 4,716 students. With the intent of sampling at least 10% of the population, a total of 540 questionnaires were distributed. 506 questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 93.37%. The 506 respondents making up the sample comprises of 10.73% of the 4,716 students in the population.

Respondents were selected through proportional stratified sampling. The study population was first stratified into 30 strata according to class schedule. At least 10% of the students in registered in each class are selected as respondents – the number of respondents selected is rounded up to the nearest whole number; thus ensuring that the percentage of students selected never falls below 10% of each stratum population.

In classes where the researcher was able to personally distribute and collect the questionnaires, systematic sampling of respondents was done. In certain other classes where the researcher was unable or not allowed to meet the students, it is likely that respondents were selected through convenient sampling. Blalock, Jr. (1972) suggests that the integrity of stratified sampling is in no way threatened by the application of varied sampling procedures when selecting samples in each stratum.

The survey was conducted throughout February 2005. All questionnaires were self administered by respondents.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Demographic profile of respondents**

Based on respondents' ethnic make up and economic class, it is concluded that survey respondents are somewhat representative of the general adult Malaysian population and thus the findings of this study can be generalized to the larger populace, albeit cautiously.

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TITAS is the acronym for *Tamadun Islam dan Tamadun Asia Tenggara* (Islamic Civilization and Southeast Asian Civilization). All undergraduate students at Malaysian public universities are required to take and pass the TITAS course.

97.6% (494) of 506 respondents declared their ethnicity – 56.1% (284) Malays, 31.2% (157) Chinese, 7.1% (36) Indians, and 3.2% (17) respondents of other ethnicities. The 12 unknown ethnicities make up 2.4% of the survey sample and are labeled missing.

The ethnic make-up of survey respondents are somewhat similar to the national ethnic make-up of individuals ages 15 and above in Malaysia reported in the *Nielsen Media Index*, wherein 59.8% are Malays, 29.8% are Chinese, and 10.4% are Indians (Media Guide 2005).

Similarly, the respondents' economic backgrounds (based on their parents' combined incomes) are somewhat representative of the general Malaysian population in 2004. Media Guide 2005 reports 32% households having incomes below RM 1,000; 30% between RM 1,000 and RM 2,000; 28% between RM 2,000 and RM 4,000; and 10% over RM 4,000 (Media Guide 2005). The median income bracket for this study's respondents was rather low; the RM 1,001 to RM 2,000 bracket, with 34.4% (174) of respondents reporting parents earning less than RM 1,000. This lowest income bracket is the most common. This study also found that the higher the income bracket, the fewer parents belonged in it. 29.1% (147) of students reported parents earning between RM 1,001 and RM 2,000. 18.8% (95) reported their parents' income were between RM 2,001 and RM 3,000. 5.9% (30) of the respondents reported parents earning between RM 3,001 and RM 4,000. Only 44 (9%) of 506 the students report coming from families with monthly incomes of over RM 4,000.

**Hypothesis 1: Respondents of different races watch the news on different television channels.**

Chi square tests of association clearly show that there are significant differences in preferred TV stations among races. All nominal by nominal symmetric measures return moderate and positive test values that are significant at the 0.01 significance level, indicating that there are associations between race and TV station used for news. (Phi values accompanied with a small significance value indicate association; Cramer's V and Contingency Coefficients can range from 0-no association at all; to 1-complete association)

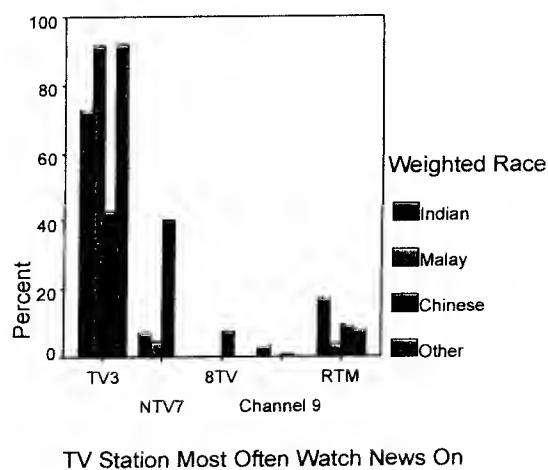
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**Figure 1. Nominal by nominal correlations test statistics for race and TV station**

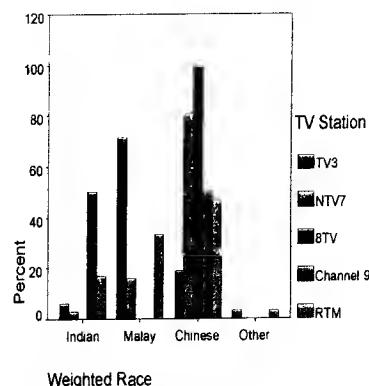
The bar chart in Figure 2 below shows the percentage of respondents from each race who watch the news on RTM, TV3, NTV7, 8TV, and Channel 9. As can clearly be seen, large percentages of each race choose TV3 as their most frequent source of television news. TV3's prime time news program, *Buletin Utama*, is among the most highly rated programs on local television, and is very likely the reason that many respondents select TV3 as their main source of TV news. It should be noted, however, that while over 90% of Malays choose TV3, the percentages are somewhat lower among Indians (about 70%) and much lower for Chinese (about 40%). The remaining 30% of Indians mostly watch RTM news (20%). About 40% of Chinese audiences watch NTV7 news, with the remaining 20% watching either 8TV or RTM. As mentioned earlier, RTM's second channel, TV2, broadcasts news in English, Mandarin, and Tamil. This variety of locally spoken languages may be a pull factor to Chinese and Indian viewers. NTV7 broadcasts news in Malay, English, and Mandarin, with a greater variety of news programs in Mandarin as compared to RTM's TV2. This may be the pull factor for the 40% respondents who listed NTV7 as their most frequently watched news channel.



**Figure 2. Bar chart showing percentage of respondents from different races who watch the news on different TV stations**

The bar chart in Figure 3 below shows the racial composition of each of the five television stations' news audiences. Racial polarization is easily detected in this bar chart, whereby the majority of 8TV and NTV7's news viewers are Chinese, while Malays make up most of TV3's news audiences, and only Chinese and Indian respondents watch the news on Channel 9. While RTM news enjoys a slightly more balanced mix of different races when compared to the other stations, the differences in percentages of viewers of different races (weighted accordingly) are by no means equal. Interestingly, about half of RTM's news viewers are made up of Chinese respondents, while only about 30% are Malays, less than 20% were Indians. It is worthwhile to note that RTM's second channel, TV2, airs many Chinese

language shows, including Chinese language news. TV2 also airs Tamil language news. TV3, on the other hand, only broadcasts news in Malay and English. It is also worthwhile to note that less than 20% of TV3's news viewers are Chinese, and less than 10% are Indian. Nearly all of those who selected 8TV as their most frequently watched news channel are Chinese. Similarly, about 80% of NTV7's news viewers are Chinese, while less than 5% are Indians.



**Figure 3. Clustered bar chart showing the racial composition of five TV stations' news audiences**

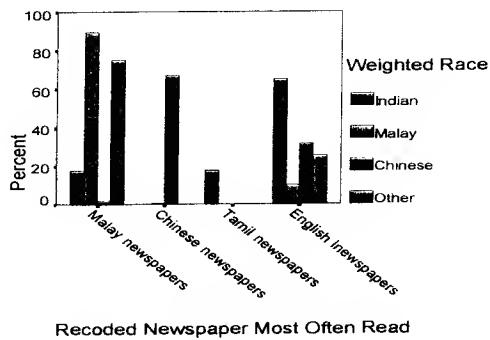
#### **Hypothesis 2: Respondents of different races read different newspapers**

Chi square tests of association clearly show that there are significant and strong differences in preferred TV newspapers among races. All nominal by nominal symmetric measures return large and positive values that are significant at the 0.01 significance level, indicating that there are strong associations between race and TV station used for news. Figure 4 below lists out the correlation coefficient values and their levels of significance. (Phi values accompanied with a small significance value indicate association; Cramer's V and Contingency Coefficients can range from 0: no association at all to 1: complete association)

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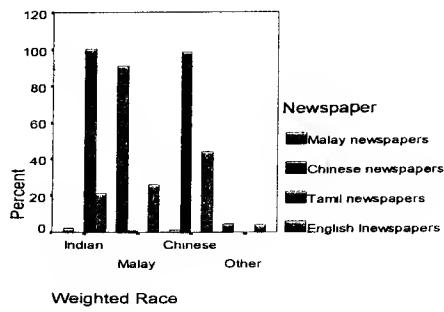
**Figure 4. Nominal by nominal correlations test statistics for race and newspaper**

The bar chart in Figure 5 below shows the percentage of respondents of different races and their preferred newspapers. It can clearly be seen that most Malay respondents choose Malay newspapers as their most frequently read newspaper. Only about 10% of Malays prefer English newspapers, and virtually none of the Malay respondents read Chinese or Tamil newspapers.



**Figure 5. Bar chart showing percentage of respondents from different races who read newspapers in different languages**

As might be expected, vernacular newspapers are mainly read by respondents of the respective race, with virtually all readers of Chinese and Tamil newspapers being respondents of those races. Very small percentages of Chinese and Indian respondents cite Malay newspapers as their most frequently read newspaper. Like the other vernacular newspapers, about 90% of Malay newspaper readers are Malay. While English newspapers have a slightly better distribution of readership among the races, the racial distribution of its readers are uneven with Chinese respondents representing nearly half of the English readers.



**Figure 6. Bar chart showing racial composition of readers of Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English newspapers**

## CONCLUSION

### Discussion

Racial polarization in most frequently used news media is most apparent in newspaper readership than among television audiences, as indicated by values returned by chi square tests of association. (Phi, Cramer's V and Contingency Coefficient values for association between newspaper and race are consistently higher than the values for association between TV station and race).

This is perhaps not surprising as newspapers in Chinese and Tamil languages can only be read by people who speak and read those languages, and in general, few non-Chinese Malaysians speak or read Chinese, and few non-Tamil Malaysians speak or read Tamil. The extremely small percentages of Chinese and Indian respondents choosing Malay newspapers is of particular concern considering that Malay is the national language. Besides this apparent lack of preference for the national language, of greater concern is the fact that vernacular newspapers tend to differ in agenda. This may mean that readers of these different newspapers have different agendas and different perceptions of important issues

Overall, TV3 and the English language newspaper *The Star* are used by Malaysians of all races, and thus act as equalizers in disseminating news to all races in Malaysia. It must be noted however that the racial distribution of TV3 news viewers and *The Star* readers are not uniform – a smaller percentage of Chinese respondents watch TV3 news as compared to Malays and Indians, and a much smaller percentage of Chinese respondents read *The Star* as compared to Malays and Indians. Furthermore, *The Star*'s overall share of newspaper readership (in terms of most frequently read newspaper) is only 16.8%. The table below summarizes the racial distribution of TV3 viewers and *The Star* readers.

Table 1. Percentage of each race that chose TV3 and *The Star*

Race	TV3	<i>The Star</i>
Malay	91.6%	20.3%
Chinese	42.7%	50.6%
Indian	72.4%	25.3%

Various studies have shown that newspaper reading leads to greater understanding and engagement with major issues as compared to television news viewing. In so far as this is true the fact respondents' differ greatly in their most frequently read newspaper may contribute to a divergent agenda among readers as these newspapers are owned by different organizations with different agendas. For example, the Malay Mail and the New Straits Times

are both owned by the News Straits Times Press but cover different types of stories with the Malay Mail running more human interest and sensationalistic stories. *Utusan Malaysia* is closely linked to the Malay political party UMNO, while *The Star* is closely affiliated to the Chinese political party MCA. Although members of the ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional*, it is an accepted fact that each party is in the business of looking after their ethnic interests. A casual look at the different newspapers should betray different agendas. And these agendas are then conveyed to their readers.

Hodson et al. (1994) suggest that among the variables associated with tolerance of other ethnic groups, exposure to the wider world through the media is one of them. A crude conjecture from this assumption is that Malaysians are tolerant because Malaysians are exposed to a wide array of media contents originating from and portraying a wide range of cultures – local and global (perhaps with exception to African culture which is rarely portrayed in available media contents). In so far as tolerance is necessary for inter ethnic interaction and national integration, Malaysia seems to be on the right track with its abundance of diverse media offerings. However, ethnic polarization and national integration (or rather lack of) often surface in public and political agendas, hinting that such a simple inference is perhaps flawed.

Nonetheless, the assumption of media effects on national integration should not be discounted. Even if a direct effect cannot be proven, logic dictates that frequent and long term exposure to diverse media options must have *some* effect on Malaysian society. Although contentions exists as to the existence and extend of media effects, media exposure, either directly, or indirectly through other people who are directly exposed to media content has a cumulative effect on individual persons and on society as a whole. This study on media use and national integration is predicated on this assumption of cumulative media effects, as are other studies relating media use to societal phenomena (MacBeth 2003).

### **Study limitations**

Although survey respondents were somewhat similar to the general Malaysian population in terms of racial distribution and economic background, there are many inherent differences between the sample and the population – age, education, current place of residence, and usage of Malay and English are among some of the differences. Findings of the study may not truly reflect the news preferences of the general Malaysian population.

While the names of specific newspapers were obtained from respondents, the study only obtained information on the television channels that respondents watched most often, but not the actual news programs that respondents watched. The latter information should be better at demonstrating or refuting racial polarization in TV news preferences as compared to just the channels watched.

Lastly, the survey instrument was designed to accept and code only one most frequently used newspaper or television channel. A better option would have been to allow respondents to list out all the newspapers and news programs that they used.

Despite the above limitations, this study has demonstrated that Malaysians of different races actually prefer different types of news media. As discussed above, this brings implications upon national integration in Malaysia.

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